

# National TeleOncology and the “Close to Me” Treatment Access Point Solution

Vida Almario Passero, MD, MBA<sup>1,2,3</sup> Jenna L Shields, PharmD, BCOP<sup>1,3</sup>; Thomas Rodgers, MD<sup>3,4,5</sup>, Erin Valenti, BSN, RN, MHA, MBA<sup>3</sup>, Kylie Peterson, BSN, RN<sup>3</sup>, Jenna Houranieh, PharmD, BCOP<sup>3</sup>, Lisa Robbins, BSN, RN, MHA<sup>3</sup>, Michael J. Kelley, MD<sup>3,4,5</sup>, Gina McWhirter, RN, MSN, MBA<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS), Pittsburgh, PA; <sup>2</sup>University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, PA; <sup>3</sup>National Oncology Program (NOP), Veterans Health Administration Specialty Care Services (11SPEC17); <sup>4</sup>Durham VA Health Care System, Durham, NC; <sup>5</sup>Duke University, Durham, NC



## BACKGROUND

Diagnosing and treating nearly 50,000 Veterans annually, the Veterans Affairs (VA) National Oncology Program (NOP) oversees the largest integrated provider network of hematology/oncology services in the US.

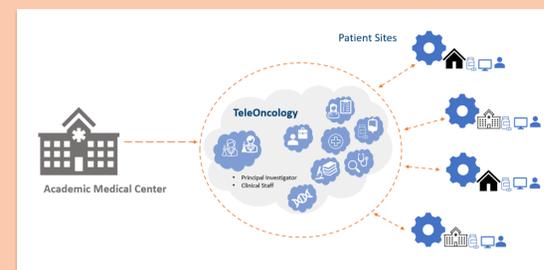
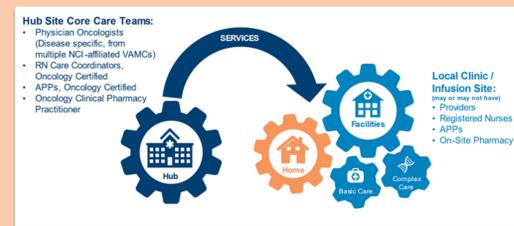
TeleOncology as an augmenting care modality is critical towards advancing health equity and addresses at least two of the CMS Health Equity Framework’s priorities:

- **Building capacity** of our healthcare organization and the workforce to reduce health disparities and
- **Increasing all potential forms of accessibility** to health care services.

In the VA, TeleOncology has grown from grassroots VA Medical Center (VAMC) efforts to National TeleOncology (NTO) launched in 2020.

## NATIONAL TELEONCOLOGY

Over 70 clinicians including at least 35 physicians located at academically-affiliated VAMCs are providing across-the-nation care through a centralized virtual hub located through the Durham VA Health Care System.



- **Staff Virtual Teamlets:** The NTO hematology/oncology physicians work in disease-specific virtual teamlets composed of advanced practice providers, clinical pharmacy practitioners, care coordinator nurses, telehealth clinical technicians, and medical support assistants. The NTO teamlets work with patient-side staff at 53 VAMC “spokes.”
- **Connection:** Patients can connect with providers two different ways – they can either travel to a spoke site to connect through clinical video telehealth or connect from their home using an internet-connected device with VA Video Connect.
- **Access and Capacity:** To date, care has been provided to over 9,000 Veterans, 51% of whom are in rural locations. Gap coverage services to address scheduled and unscheduled staff shortages and preserve care continuity.
- **Services, Menu of Options:** Asynchronous electronic consultation, synchronous continuous primary hematology/oncology disease-specific management, second opinion consultations, Clinical Cancer Genetic Services (counseling, testing), oncology clinical pharmacy synchronous management, disease-specific National Virtual Tumor Boards involving teleradiologists, pathologists, surgical oncologists, and radiation oncologists across the country.

## CLOSE TO ME



The Close to Me (CTM) infusion service was created to reduce patient travel, improve continuity, and increase access points. CTM services ensure nurses can administer hematology/oncology injection and infusion treatments closer to patients at primary care-based clinics, utilizing the network of VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC).

Now available at 20 CBOCs, over 53,000 drive miles have been saved with over \$1 million dollars in cost avoidance achieved. The CTM CBOC treatment service has reported no medical emergencies and a patient adherence of 98.8%.

CTM first launched at **Minneapolis VA CBOCs in October 2021**, followed by a second service expansion at **Pittsburgh VA CBOCs in June 2022**

To date, CTM has:

- **Increased safe access points for treatments** close to where patients live
- **Reduced travel burden** for patients
- **Reduced medication cost expenditures**
- **Increased options** to continue care within the VA
- **Ensured overall 98.8 % treatment adherence**



## SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

NTO represents a clear model to improve equity and accessibility in cancer care. Having a national approach provides a **national view of disparities** and the opportunity to create **multiple solutions** to reduce those disparities, build capacity through a responsive teamlet workforce, and maximize telehealth to improve connection and access to care.

- **NTO Growth:** Multi-solution expansion to 100 sites across the nation, Digital pathology, Decentralized clinical trials
  - **CTM Expansion:** 10 additional VAMCs for treatment at CBOCs and at patients’ homes, Geospatial and other analytic tools to monitor implementation progress and identify data-driven directions for future expansion opportunities, Toolkit for reproducibility and scale
- CONTACT:** [cancer@va.gov](mailto:cancer@va.gov), [closetome@va.gov](mailto:closetome@va.gov)